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ABSTRACT

Teachers ought to know how to identify the alcoholic student (and also the student in early recovery), and how to help such students. Research indicates that alcohol is implicated in 38% of all academic failures. The alcoholic student may smell of alcohol, act in a disoriented manner, or drop out, but as many as one-third of students surveyed recently exhibited no "academic" signs of their problem. A more reliable indicator may be social behavior. Alcoholic students tend to be loners, avoiding face-to-face contact with the teacher and withdrawn in class. One way to help these students is to model appropriate behavior. The most helpful course is to make these students responsible for the consequences of their behavior. Educators should be able to refer students to local agencies familiar with alcoholism. It usually does no good to ask students directly if they have a drinking problem. Students in early recovery from drug and alcohol addiction pose a different challenge: they may have tremors that interfere with handwriting; they may have trouble concentrating; and they may talk and write about recovery repeatedly. Writing teachers should talk frankly to such students about "audience" and remind them of how they themselves would have reacted to such proselytizing a short time ago. Students should also be given help in setting long-term goals, and in focusing on small steps to move them toward those goals. If teachers learn to identify and cope with such students, perhaps they can also help them. (RS)

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ADDICTED STUDENT:

CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR.

TEACHER RESPONSE

(PAPER PRESENTED AT THE 1993 4C'S MEETING)

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I've been asked to speak on how to identify and help the addicted student, based on my community counseling experience and on a recent survey I did of Del Mar and CCSU students in alcohol recovery programs.

I will focus primarily on the alcoholic student, since studies indicate that a student's interest in drugs increases as their alcohol consumption increases; the drinking seems to come first. Even if a student is not an alcoholic, their heavy drinking may affect their health, their social life, and their academic performance. So we ought to know how to identify the addicted student, what we can do for them, how to identify a student in early recovery, and how we can help them.

We've always known that college students are not exempt from alcohol and drug problems. I'm sure you've all encountered students you suspected were alcoholics or were headed in that direction.

But the extent of college drinking may surprise you. Recently, the Fund For the Improvement Of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) studied drinking on campus and found that 1% of all college students (at all types of institutions of higher education) drink daily. 8% have over 15 drinks per week. Nearly one-half reported a drinking binge (defined by consuming 5 or more drinks in one sitting) within the past two weeks. 30% had missed class due to drinking.

The U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services' statistics are even more shocking. Alcohol is implicated in 38% of all academic failures. Among currently enrolled undergraduates, the number who will go on to earn advanced degrees will equal the number who will eventually die alcohol-related deaths. And the younger the drinker, the faster the addiction seems to develop.

To help these students, we must have some idea who they are. The alcoholic student may, of course, smell of alcohol or act in a disoriented manner. They may write often about getting drunk, hangovers, or DUI's. They may drop out. Yet 1/3 of the students I surveyed said they exhibited no "academic" signs of their problem. (These students earned A's and B's while drinking heavily.)

A more reliable indicator may be social behavior. Alcoholic students tend to be loners, avoiding face-to-face contact with the teacher and reluctant to discuss in class. They may be doing quite well on a paper and just stop working on it, or turn it in unfinished. They may be moody and depressed. If they are using other drugs as well, their thought processes are likely impaired--especially their memory and their sequencing ability (crucial to narrative).

Be prepared to deal with a suspected alcoholic student before you encounter one. Think through just what you would--and would not--feel comfortable saying. Teachers are

under no obligation to be counselors as well. Even if you choose to avoid a discussion about alcohol, you may be relieved simply to have identified the probable cause of the student's behavior in your own mind.

One way to help these students is to model responsible behavior yourself. Avoid making jokes about "partying," etc. Use common sense in your own off-campus behavior, especially in locations frequented by students. I'm not advocating a return to outdated codes like a 1915 prohibition against teachers loitering in ice cream stores. Simply think about what you do, where you do it, and who might be watching. Students, even our older ones, do look to us as they form their own pictures of life as an "educated" person.

Your most helpful course is to make these students responsible for the consequences of their behavior. Don't extend deadlines out of sympathy. If you feel certain that alcohol is a problem for them, you may want to confront them. First express your concern for them. Next describe their behavior and its consequences factually.

Then make suggestions. Know local referrals such as an on-campus wellness center, treatment centers, counselors and counseling agencies familiar with alcoholism (not all are well-educated in this area). You might want to keep copies of Alcoholics Anonymous meeting schedules or questionnaires from the Council on Alcoholism in your office.

It won't usually do much good to ask students directly if they have a drinking problem, and you'll only frustrate yourself by expecting to see miraculous changes in a student overnight following your confrontation. Of all the students I surveyed, only one actually got sober while enrolled in college. But they do hear what you say. Your words stay with them and may hasten a future awareness and acceptance of their addiction.

One re-entry student in her early 30's with three years' sobriety told me her chilling story. As a high school sophomore she had attempted suicide while drunk. In the emergency room, bloody, aggressive, and still obviously drunk, she noticed her biology teacher (a weekend volunteer in the small-town hospital) looking straight at her. She waited for him to say something. She waited the entire school year. She says, "I wouldn't have stopped drinking then, no matter what. But I believe that if he had said anything at all, just acknowledged that he had seen me like that, I wouldn't have been able to continue in denial for a dozen more years.

Students in early recovery from drug and alcohol addiction pose a different challenge. They may have tremors that interfere with writing. They may have trouble concentrating. They may latch onto you or another student, to replace their old drinking buddies. They may try to do

too much too fast, and they may talk and write about recovery until you're sick of hearing about it. They may use slogans from twelve-step programs (such as "Let Go and Let God," "Keep It Simple," and "One Day at a Time") as if they were universally accepted truths.

Be patient with them. This is only a temporary stage. Talk frankly with them about "audience," and remind them of how they themselves would have reacted to such proselytizing a short time ago. Help them set long-term goals and then focus on small, immediate steps to move them toward those goals. And praise what you legitimately can: most alcoholics report coming into recovery programs with very low self-esteem.

After they have been sober a few years, college students recovering from chemical addiction usually become wonderful students. They don't need our help; they want it in the classic teacher-student tradition. They are highly self-motivated, responsible, hard-working, and often quite bright.

The FIPSE study I cited earlier shows that college drug and alcohol prevention programs help reduce overall campus drinking. So please get involved, either individually or as part of a group effort. The student alcoholic/addict is among us every day. If we learn to identify and cope with such students, perhaps we may also help them.